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A.NOLEN

Assaulting Mt. Helicon: Writing and Current Affairs.

monthly archives: NOVEMBER 2013

THE STRANGE STORY OF MRS PANKHURST

Who owns the copyright?

Popular movements so often loose their way. Look at 'Occupy Wall Street': its original goal was to end government subsidies to corrupt banks 'too big to fail'. Now, it's fractured into a thousand little movements with different causes. The Tea Party was supposed to make government small– frightening enough to the well-heeled– but thanks to pundits like Glenn Beck, the Tea Party became conflated with other social issues, shrinking its potential supporter base and creating a convenient boogeyman for America's establishment.

Two things strike me. Occupy and Tea Party, 'left' and 'right' movements with a lot of cross-over appeal, both began by pushing for 'less government money for special interests'. They are both popular movements; but their clear aims are undermined with a plethora of tag-along, divisive issues. Their political potential is being dissipated.

The same thing is happening with the Snowden revelations. It began when the media focused on international-state-spying instead of the NSA's, and other countries' intelligence services', **domestic** spying operations. I had to laugh when Greenwald tweeted this:

> *Important point from @KenRoth: key to NSA story internationally isn't spying on leaders- it's bulk spying on citizens http://t.co/1dKKJEPUIu*
>
> *— Glenn Greenwald (@ggreenwald) November 11, 2013*

Yes, true that. Shame you came to the realization so late, Glenn.

The political charge from Snowden's revelations is being dissipated by confusing the issue at hand. Take, for instance, the 'Stop Watching Us' marches. Part of the meme: angry protestors in Guy-Fawkes-masks from the Hollywood movie *V for Vendetta*. These masks are also symbolic of hacker groups comprising 'Anonymous'.

Why those masks? Because Edward Snowden leaked documents *through Anonymous*? Because Snowden's girlfriend wore a mask in her blog-photo? Or because Anonymous organizers want some of Snowden's stardust to rub off on *them*, to merge his heroic act into the hacker groups' general confusion? Anonymous itself has slipped into anarchy, getting involved in everything from high school rape, to squabbling with Wikileaks, to stealing Stratfor data. Oh yeah, and the FBI managed to penetrate and use Anonymous along the way.

Movements that command wide support are frightening to people in power. That's why ladies like Dianne Feinstein get bitchy when the public threatens to take away their ~~security blanket~~ domestic surveillance powers.

The only people who benefit from frustrated popular movements are those in power and their lap-dogs. Do these movements frustrate themselves through the inherent incompetence of the general public? Or do folks like Glenn Beck, or Jacob Appelbaum, or Glenn Greenwald, do what they do with purpose? Is it possible that government agents penetrate domestic political movements with an eye to castrating them, or does that sort of thing only happen under Tsars, dictators and one-party-states?

It seems, readers, such political tinkering *can and has* happened in civilized democracies. You may be surprised by my example of one such manipulation: the charmed life of Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst, feminist extraordinaire and champion of woman's rights.

Mrs. Pankhurst built a small, but very visible, political mover

around limited suffrage for rich women like herself. To that end, she condoned arson and other violence. Her tactics earned her attention well beyond what her popularity supported and she became a 'face' of the wider women's suffrage movement.

On the eve of World War I, however, Pankhurst told her followers to change their focus. Instead of women's rights, they would promote the war at all costs.

Why this sudden change of stance? According to historian John Simkin, Mrs. Pankhurst began negotiations with the British government at the start of WWI. The British leadership provided her with GBP 2000 to stop fighting for privileged women's suffrage and to support the war effort instead. The British Government released all criminal suffragettes from prison too.

Recap: 'the man' threw a lot of money at Pankhurst so that she would *use* her people in service of his war effort.

Pankhurst's suffragettes stopped breaking windows and burning buildings. Instead, they bullied young men into fighting a stupid war. These were the ladies handing out 'white feathers'. They charged people who opposed them with being 'ethnically German' (!); labor leaders who didn't support Pankhurst were 'bolshevik'; dovish politicians were 'traitors'.

> *"Mrs. Pankhurst toured the country, making recruiting speeches. Her supporters handed the white feather to every young man they encountered wearing civilian dress, and bobbed up at Hyde Park meetings with placards: "Intern Them All."*

None of this behavior has much to do with rich women's right to vote, does it? Mrs. Pankhurst's dogs were turned on the government's enemies. Now, Emmeline has a memorial statue outside the Houses of Parliament. Who said cheaters never prosper?

We can look back on Pankhurst's legacy with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight. We know that the British government had some clever tricks in their political play-book, *and not just in the colonies*. We know that for GBP 2000, Mrs. Pankhurst was willing to undermine suffragettes' work, with no guarantee that their sacrifices would ever be rewarded. We know that Mrs. Pankhurst was a paid political agitator.

Mrs. Pankhurst acted with a definite purpose, and I propose that the guys on our screens– the Appelbaums, Greenwalds and Becks of the world– do too. They're our very own foundation-caked Okhrana.

—-

It may interest readers to know that Alva Belmont, mother to Consuelo Duchess of Marlborough, was an ardent supporter of Emmeline Pankhurst and paid to bring Pankhurst's militant ways Stateside. (It was Consuelo's fortune that paid for Chruchill's political career.)

As part of her feminist efforts, Alva Belmont hired a young step-and-fetch called Clare Boothe. Clare would eventually become a congresswoman, famous for her affair with British spy Roald Dahl, her support of America's involvement in WWII and her penchant for black ops. It's a small, small world.

LEAVE A COMMENT

TOBACKY

Death-sticks at the first Thanksgiving. I'm kidding.

There's not much to do in the garden over the winter. This season's fun comes from the seed catalogs, which arrive in a steady stream from now until March. Because of these catalogs, winter is also the most expensive time of the gardening year. I'm busy leafing through the pages; my husband is busy throwing out the mailings as fast as possible.

This year, I saw a spread that I've never seen before. Tobacco is the new 'in' plant.

If you're a gardener, you'll know what I mean. Fritillaria, stevia, decorative cabbage. There are trends in what's cool to plant. Tobacco will be 2014, or 2015 at the latest.

But the tobacco trend isn't just about looks. There's something darker going on here, and to explain this darkness here's an excerpt from the tobacco sales pitch:

> *As it spread, tobacco became known as an herb of amiability, conviviality and a degree of intoxication. Today usage patterns have changed to the habitual consumption of*

> *mass produced, chemically enhanced cigarettes, with deleterious health impacts. Growing and harvesting your own plants can serve as a transition away from dependence on packaged, highly taxed, smoking materials.*

My first thought as I read this was: “Wow. It’s becoming like pot.”

Which isn’t quite right, is it? Organically-grown, heirloom tobacco seeds, even the species variety, are becoming like methadone. They’re being touted as a treatment to your heroin-like cigarette dependency.

There are so many things wrong with this picture, but before I start let me lay out my cards. I don’t smoke, but half of my family does. My husband chews– those little ‘skoal’ pouches with hashed up leaves and fruity flavoring. Whether your smoke or chew, it’s an expensive habit because 1) the product itself is pricey and 2) your insurance premiums go up.

There are things I’d rather spend that money on than tobacco, however, I respect everybody’s right to choose to use tobacco, just as I respect their right to choose to have a drink or get a prescription from a shrink. I’m more comfortable being in the passenger seat next to someone who is a smoker, rather than a drinker or user of psychoactive medications.

And there’s the rub, because while tobacco seeds are sold as a ‘healthy’ alternative to a poisonous habit, grape vines are sold as a chic accoutrements to your micro-vinyard and the envy of all your less-landed baby-boomer friends.

Let me restate that: heirloom grapes are not a healthy alternative to a scummy drug habit. Heirloom tobacco, on the other hand, is.

How far we’ve come! In highschool, I remember reading Paul Johnson’s *A History of the American People*. He wrote about Brits being so disgusted by the spitoons around Congress (spitoons for the *chew*), that they missed the significance of the political experiment going on right before their eyes.

There was a time, some would say a better time, when the States were lead by local farmers who *grew* tobacco, *did* a hell of a lot of tobacco and practiced law on the side. Despite their nefarious chemical habits, these men came up with some sound ideas. Shocking, isn’t it?

I would say that now, on Thanksgiving ’13, the US of A is at a crossing point. Tobacco, a plant that has been smoked on this continent for *a really long time* is considered more nefarious than marijuana, a non-native plant which the Brits tolerated amongst their Indian coolies because weed kept them passive. (Think on that.) I’m left asking: “Why?”

Why do we go after Big Tobacco instead of Big Alcohol or Big Pharma? Is the problem with the people who own Big Tobacco? Or the people running Big Tobacco? Or is it the politicians that Big Tobacco supports, politicians who Michael Rabinoff, author of *Ending the Tobacco Holocaust,* identified as Margaret Thatcher, Howard Baker and George Mitchell. It’s funny that the industry suffered a state-sponsored gutting a few years after KKR, General Petraeus’ new teat, took one of the largest tobacco firms over in a hostile fashion. But that’s probably just a coincidence, right?

In conclusion: Today I am very thankful for the right to choose to smoke or not to smoke. I will go out of my way to thank people who exercise their right to smoke in the face of government-sponsored ostracism. Happy Thanksgiving!

LEAVE A COMMENT

PLEASE STAND UP, MR. OMIDYAR

Team Global (R)

I have deep, deep skepticism over Pierre Omidyar’s media venture with the slippery Ms. Poitras and her sidekick, Glenn.

Seems I’m not the only one.

Mr. Omidyar, far from being a ‘new’ type of billionaire, represents what’s worst about globalism. I mean suicides, loan-sharking, and economic wet-work *a la* Andrei Shleifer.

Check out the following:

The Extraordinary Pierre Omidyar

By Mark Ames, and Yasha Levine

> *Pierre Omidyar's dystopian vision is merging with Glenn Greenwald's and Laura Poitras' monopoly on the crown jewels of the National Security Agency — the world's secrets, our secrets — and using the value of those secrets as the capital for what's being billed as an entirely new, idealistic media project, an idealism that the CJR [Columbia Journalism Review] and others promise will not shy away from taking on power.*
>
> *The question, however, is what defines power to a neoliberal mind? We're going to take a wild guess here and say: The State.*

Ames and Levine don't go as far as questioning Poitras, Scahill and Greenwald's motives for tying their collective cart to Omidyar's horse. (Why not?) But they *are* brave enough to point out that Pierre's media venture will be just another hum-drum mouthpiece for corporate America.

Maybe one more girl in the chorus-line isn't a bad thing. It's another chance for the US, and the World, to listen carefully then consider *who* is delivering the warm, fuzzy message.

LEAVE A COMMENT

JIHAD AL-WHAT?

Mecca, Medina… Threadneedle Street?

I read a disturbing interview on *Russia Today* yesterday morning, titled: *Americans 'have made up a new Islam'*. The interviewee, Dr. Nacib Hoteit, is (I believe) a Lebanese government commissioner with a PhD in Architecture from the University of Moscow.

> *The US government is trying to destroy the Muslim world from the inside by creating a so-called "American Islam" that leaves just the shell of the religion, Lebanese politician and analyst Dr. Nacib Hoteit told RT.*

An inflammatory article like this appearing in *RT*, a Russian-government funded outlet, could easily be dismissed as heavy-handed anti-American propaganda. However, some of Dr. Hoteit's observations ring true to this blogger, and having lived in the Middle East, I was particularly disturbed to read about 'jihad al-nikah'. In Dr. Hoteit's' own words:

> *The USA is the main player in the international arena, and it plays people and societies as if they were pawns. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are just pawns as well.*
>
> *They [the USA] introduced three elements into their new Islam – Takfiris, money and Jihad Al-Nikah.*

I've heard of takfir, I've got first hand experience with the US/UK inserting themselves into Islamic Finance, but 'jihad al-nikah' is new to me. Not only that, it is a *totally alien* concept to what I've experienced of fundamentalist Islam in the Middle East.

'Jihad al-nikah' is a practice similar to what 'comfort women' were to the Japanese military in WWII, except that the woman are recruited with extremist Islamic ideology. According to *Al Arabiya*:

> *Jihad al-nikah, permitting extramarital sexual relations with multiple partners, is considered by some hardline Sunni Muslim Salafists as a legitimate form of holy war.*

And according to a Tunisian official:

> *Interior Minister Lotfi ben Jeddou told the National Constituent Assembly in September that Tunisian women had gone to Syria where "they have sexual relations with 20, 30, 100" militants.*
>
> *"After the sexual liaisons they have there in the name of 'jihad al-nikah' — (sexual holy war, in Arabic) — they come home pregnant," Ben Jeddou said at the time.*

Clearly, 'jihad al-nikah' is not just about making sons for the fight. This is promoting casual sex in the name of jihad. Sort of like the 1960's Sexual Revolution retooled for the contemporary Middle East! Indigenous Islamic fundamentalists have some odd ideas, but promiscuity is not one of them (at least not for Muslim women).

The Tunisian Interior Minister Ben Jeddou's speech on jihad al-nikah is important, because prior to any official recognition, jihad al-nikah was dismissed by some as a 'smear campaign'. The 'smear campaign' hypothesis is still trumpeted by *Der Spiegel* , which insists jihad al-nikah is just Assad's– or Russians', or Iranians' or Christians'– propaganda. But even *Der Spiegel* won't go as far as calling Ben Jeddou a liar. (*Der Spiegel* is the German magazine that's *supposed to be* anti-American because it publishes articles on Snowden by Jacob Appelbaum *et alia*. '*Der Spiegel*= Anti-American' is a legend I'm not buying.)

I'd be more inclined to believe jihad al-nikah was an invention of Assad, or of "Russian and Iranian broadcasters" if I didn't know from personal experience that the US and the UK *are* trying to 'build a new

Islam' through Islamic Finance.

Britain's Chartered Institute for Securities and Investment is the first Western organization to try to 'standardize' Islamic finance. In their own words:

> *The Islamic Finance Qualification (IFQ) is a ground-breaking qualification that covers Islamic finance from both a technical and a Sharia'a perspective, providing the first international benchmark in the area of Islamic finance.*
>
> *It provides an understanding of the influence of Sharia'a in a business context and prepares candidates to hold key positions in the Islamic finance and takaful (Islamic insurance) industries.*

In practice, this qualification supports a very liberal interpretation of Islamic financial law, rubber-stamped by a group of clerics in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. This partnership combines a back-door for derivatives trading with the hard-line Islamic prestige of the Holy Land (Saudi Arabia). CISI's move is 100% cynical and 100% in line with American, and both of our Middle Eastern partners', power goals. The Bank of Lebanon has also got in on CISI's act, which Dr. Hoteit, if he is the same Dr. Hoteit who sits on the board of IDAL: Invest in Lebanon, is probably well aware of.

So much for CISI's 'Islamic Finance'. What about American-influenced takfiri? Readers will remember that Saudi Arabia, where Sunni-Islam is the official religion, sometimes funds religious extremism as part of its foreign policy goals, as does Saudi Arabia's long-time partner, the United States. The US had a lot to do with starting Al Qaeda in the first place. Calling somebody else 'apostate' is a favorite in every religious fundamentalist's playbook, and proclaiming a 'takfir' is the Islamic version.

So, I *know* that the first two pillars of 'American Islam', as identified by Dr. Hoteit, are facts on the ground. Sunni fundamentalist takfir and CSIS's Islamic Banking are Saudi/US/UK-backed attempts to influence the development of Islam.

The third pillar, jihad al-nikah, is something new and unusually twisted. In my time in the Middle East, I heard of many instances of non-believers being used for sex– Muslims have their own interpretation of Freud's "Madonna/whore" complex– but fundamentalists *using their own women* in this way was unheard of. 'Respecting their women' is something that Muslim fundamentalists insist differentiates themselves from infidels. The 'jihad al-nikah' strategy, **openly** prostituting one's own, is culturally alien.

So who is promoting jihad al-nikah? The women involved in jihad al-nikah come from Chechnya, Egypt, France, Germany, Iraq as well as Tunisia. How many of those countries are now under American influence? Male fighters enter Syria predominantly through Turkey and Libya, female 'fighters' probably do too. Jihad al-nikah is not an indigenous idea, and it is promoted through American-controlled areas.

What can we surmise about jihad al-nikah, the third pillar of 'American Islam'?

1) 'Comfort women' are a well-known military tactic.

2) The Tunisian government recognizes jihad al-nikah as a problem.

3) The women in question mostly come from US-controlled regions or US allies, they *probably* travel through US-controlled regions or allies too.

4) Jihad al-nikah is a culturally alien concept in the Middle East.

In conclusion, I believe it's *very likely* that Dr. Hoteit's third pillar is true as well.

If 'American Islam' gains hold, there will be more conflict in the future. What happens when these fatherless children grow up? Gangs of rudderless youths ripe for Al Qaeda recruitment, ready to spread the fight to Germany/France/Tunisia? Generation after generation of war?

I hope this new cult isn't successful, for the sake of sane Muslims who don't want poison in their veins, and for the sake of every American GI who didn't sign up to fight for Al-Qaeda.

LEAVE A COMMENT

BARBARIANS AT THE GATE

2013 is the new 410.

The best writers tend to be older people. It's not just 'the wisdom of age' which makes this true; I believe that effective imagery comes from life experience. Gripping descriptions come from *having been there,* and often the truth is stranger than fiction.

I was struck this morning by the strange poetry swirling through General Petraeus' life. We know him from his sordid affair with Paula Broadwell, and the resulting Jill Kelley slime. We *should* know him as 'the man in charge of the CIA when Benghazi happened'. In the future, we'll know him for his 'financial acumen', since he's been hired by Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co.

In May, General Petraeus landed a gig with KKR; the investment firm famous for its leveraged buyout of RJR Nabisco. *Barbarians at the Gate* is the name of the 1989 book about Nabisco's buyout.

'Barbarians at the Gate!' The latest chapter in Petraeus' life provides us with the most gripping imagery of all. Dust clouds, shiny helmets, body odor. As the muse of poetry would have it, 'barbarians at the gate' sums up the latest chapter in J. Christopher Steven's life too, or so the administration would have us believe.

Personally, I stopped paying attention to Petraeus way back when he got his teaching post at CUNY. Shame on me, because now he's in the investment business.

It should be clear to everyone what happened with 'The Petraeus Affair'. Those members of the armed forces who christened Petreaus "General Betray-Us" had him pegged. The over-blown relationship with Broadwell was 'outed' to distract from the debacle at Benghazi on top of Obama's re-election. Now Mrs. Clinton is distancing herself from decisions surrounding the attack. 2016?

The General is being well paid for his act of seppuku. He can now prostitute his military-acquisition contacts for a company that is (or was) struggling to find new direction as its founders aged out.

David should feel quite at home. KKR is known for investing in telecommunications– the industry that got retroactive immunity for its crimes against the American people. Petraeus will do business with a group of CIA-tag-alongs straight out of Central Casting. He'll be working with men like Sir Arun Sarin, formerly of Vodafone (his part of the business became Verizon in 2000). Sarin is a man who typifies Britain's special relationship with the US by playing fast and loose with the law. Also on the roster is Alexander Navab, whose parents cut-and-ran after the Iranian Revolution, when the CIA-puppet-Shah was knocked from power. ('Sunni' is the new 'Imperial'!) And these are just the guys who talk to the press.

Kohlberg, Kravis and Roberts themselves are notoriously camera-shy. Why? According to legend, Henry Hillman, an original KKR investor, said: "a whale is harpooned only when it spouts". Inspires confidence, doesn't it? Well, now Petraeus has joined the (quietly!) raging horde.

But what are barbarians without their babes?

Jill Kelley is struggling to grow her notoriety into a more permanent fame, while Paula Broadwell seems to have been trampled in the General's dust, at least for now. I have some sympathy for Paula: I'm not sure that there is an entirely honorable way to advance oneself in her career-of-choice. Her behavior reflects larger failings than just her own and somewhere during the struggle she lost the plot.

It's worth remembering that the same pundits who whaled into Paula for being a slut would have probably sucked up to her, had she been able to leverage her relationship with Petraeus into a position of influence. In Washington, sleeping your way to the top is only ugly when it doesn't work. In the meantime, Paula can take solace in the fact that Boudica didn't win against the boys either.

I challenge any writer to *make up* imagery better than Petraeus' latest move. An elderly 'warrior', who's made a career out of hostile takeovers, teams up with some aging 'barbarians' who've made a career out of leveraged buyouts. A trail of bodies lies in everyone's wake. And if Verizon's new government deal is anything to go by, we can expect more raping and pillaging to come.

2 COMMENTS

NEW BLOG LAYOUT

I remember these!

Greetings Readers!

I've been blogging for over a year now and I've got nearly 200 posts in one long list on this homepage.

That's probably not convenient for you to browse or read. So I've taken action. Previous posts are now categorized into four pages, located in the menu at the bottom of this page (scroll all the way down):

-Roald Dahl

His colorful life as a writer and a spy.

-Mikhail Bulgakov

His profound writing and spooky life on the edge of under-cover Moscow.

-Writing

Everything I've learned so far.

-Current Events

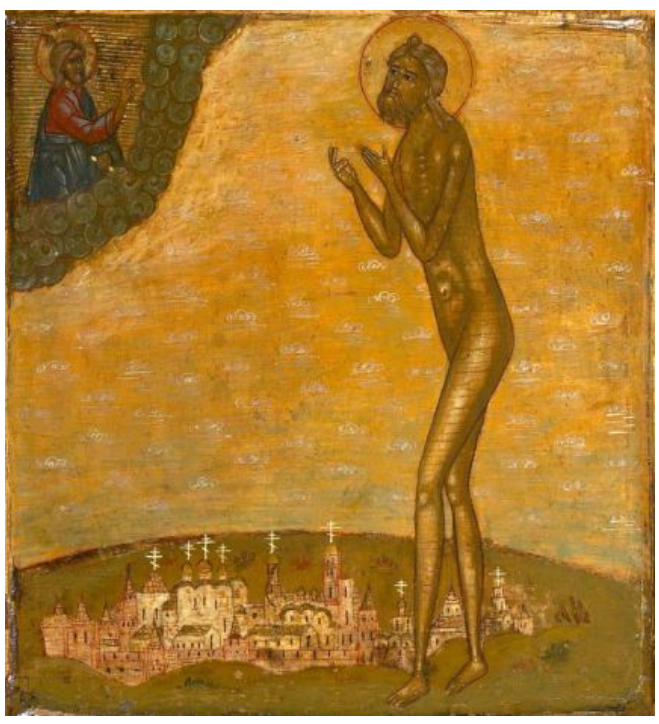
Where you can find my writing on contemporary culture and things like the Snowden Saga.

Each post has a short description in italics underneath the link. Not all posts have been linked to, but I'm working on it.

I hope this makes reading and linking easier. Thanks for stopping by!

LEAVE A COMMENT

THE HOLY FOOL



The Devil is never a fool.

I studied English Lit in high school. I really liked John Donne, Shakespeare, the guys old enough to 'tell it like it is'. I even liked Webster, and if I was a rich movie director, I'd pay exorbitant amounts of money to cast the beautiful Louise Mensch as Vittoria in *The White Devil*. That would be art.

But then something happened. Around 1865 more writers became introverted and navel-gazing became fashionable. Somebody called it 'the velvet glove generation'. George Eliot, Henry James… they were just so *boring*. And these were the authors my English teacher liked.

So throughout my A-levels, I read more Russian literature than English. And it showed. Yikes. But the upside is, I enjoyed those two years!

The Russians were interesting– and I'm talking about Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov– because they dealt with bigger issues, social issues, and did so with masculinity. Sometimes they wrote cruel comedy, which worked because comedy is disarming and is often the only constructive way to approach painful themes. There is something laughably tragic about Holy Fools, which is why I'm writing about them today.

I believe that Russians do Holy Fools best, maybe it's because they've had a lot of tragedy to laugh at in the past 100 or so years. Whatever the reason, Holy Fools are omnipresent in Russian culture: from St. Basil down to Father Anatoly of Pavel Lungin's awesome movie *The Island* (Остров). However, this character is easy for English-speakers to

misunderstand, because the term 'fool' gets conflated with 'idiot' or 'jester'.

Here's what you need to know about the Russian Holy Fool:

He appears 'foolish' because he has a deeper understanding of the world than other people. His priorities are not yours, or mine. Therefore, he doesn't sweat the little stuff– be that bathing, common courtesy or material possessions. He sees things as they are, which means he sees devils where you might see convenience or illness; he is impatient where you might be sympathetic. The Holy Fool is *constantly* tuned into the 'bigger picture'. He is intolerant of sin because he is hyper-aware of where it leads– that's his tough love for humanity.

Holy Fools aren't limited to (directly) religious causes. HFs matter today because an awful lot of conflicts are due to their persistence. Take, for instance, the Holy Fools who believe sweatshops are unjust (hey, at least sweatshops provide jobs!); or who believe phone calls are private (third-party-doctrine protects us from real-world terrorists!); or even worse, that government should be formed of checks-and-balances (how inefficient!). These guys have an annoying, and 'naive', opinion on everything.

Holy Fools run around with their tin-foil hats predicting the worst for humanity should we deviate from some impossibly stringent set of rules. Don't they know that life is more complicated than that? Why are they always seeing demons hiding behind our laptops and television screens? Why can't they just be sexy and understand that compromise is what grown-ups do? But this type of reasonableness just isn't in the fool's nature.

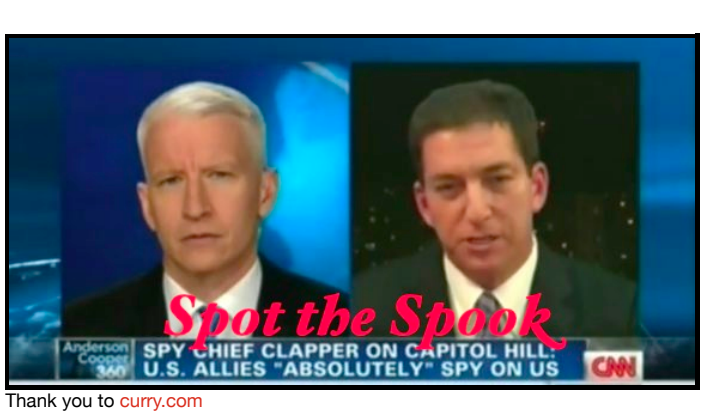
The Holy Fool is neither cosmopolitan, diplomatic nor practical; the Devil is never a fool. However, what the Holy Fool lacks in polish, he makes up for in consistency. When his behavior falls short of his standards, he changes his behavior and repents. He loves truth even when the truth is ugly. The Holy Fool's a *really* tough guy to be around. Why would the Russians make *him* a literary staple?

The Russians, a people known for cruelty, corruption and power-politics, know the Holy Fool best. Maybe it's their fatalistic view of life that gives the Russians their exceptional understanding of this archetype. Make all the vodka jibes you want, *but at least they understand him.*

LEAVE A COMMENT

Round Two!

LEAVE A COMMENT



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LEAVE A COMMENT

THE SOLDIER

I grew up calling November 11th “Armistice Day” and buying little paper poppies from elderly ladies. These poppies were in remembrance of WWI, and the proceeds went to wounded vets and war memorials. Therefore, I always associate today with the wounded.

There was a stand-off a few weeks ago in my town. That never happens. The entire block where my mother-in-law lives was on lock-down for about thirteen hours.

Why? A man had a fight with his girlfriend, had barricaded himself inside his home and threatened suicide. That was the immediate cause. This man had also recently got divorced, had a spate of tragic family events and served two tours overseas with a unit where three of his comrades had already committed suicide.

This vet is well-liked in town. Throughout the stand-off cops escorted his neighbors to and from their homes, which nobody felt they needed, because even in his frantic state his neighbors knew the vet would never shoot *them*. Three cop units, the K-9 unit, a TV-News crew and (I’m told) one percussion grenade later, the vet is in therapy and no one was shot.

We’re great at clean-up; not so good at prevention. All this reminds me of a short story, a Dahl story, and a rather unusual one because it isn’t mirthful and it carries a direct message.

The Soldier was published in 1953 as part of *Someone Like You*. ‘The Soldier’ is a man with a nerve disorder, something like shell-shock, who has episodes of confusion. During one of these episodes he nearly kills his wife.

The story is about the subtle, persistent damage of war. The quiet, sordid suffering of a couple who will never really be healthy again. There’s nothing teary-eyed or *dulce et decorum* about this story, like Dahl’s war-time propaganda. It’s just ugliness, senility and being ‘used up’ before one’s time. It’s tragic.

It’s interesting that Dahl would write a story like this because he put on a very different face during the war: one of bravado, mindless hate for the enemy and a general contempt for the law.

After the war, when the glamorous life in D.C. and N.Y.C. had spat him out into Britain’s malnourished hinterland, he had time to reflect on the morbid reality of a war that he had, largely, missed. He felt self-conscious about the ease of *his* wartime for the rest of his life.

Naturally, *The Soldier* is a technically excellent story. Dahl starts with his favorite “sympathetic dog owner” character, who is a veteran. The story is mostly direct speech between the veteran, his doctor and a woman. This woman is demanding and strange. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that the veteran is not living in the same world as the rest of us. Familiar things are threatening; he has difficultly remembering. The ‘twist’ at the end of the story is that the woman he complains about, and is about to knife in ‘self-defense’, is his wife. Suddenly she is a more sympathetic character and the extent of the veteran’s illness is revealed. The large man is dealt with like a child by a small, tired woman with a lisp.

So, I’ve reviewed an excellent, but ugly and awkward story on November 11th.

I don’t much like this holiday because it seems that whatever you do to ‘remember’ is somewhat lacking. Trumpets and cheering seem inappropriate, mournfulness seems inappropriate, anger seems inappropriate and just quiet reflection doesn’t seem quite right either. “Never again” won’t happen, we will go to unnecessary wars again, so there’s something about the whole holiday that seems insufficient and insincere. And in the meantime more broken men will fall through the cracks. Happy Armistice Day?

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July 2014
June 2014
May 2014
April 2014
March 2014
February 2014
January 2014
December 2013
November 2013
October 2013
September 2013
August 2013
July 2013
June 2013
May 2013
April 2013
March 2013
February 2013
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